

Panpsychism versus religion

### Description

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Religion, religious practice, and religiosity are central in architecture and built form, not least as domestic, commercial and civic buildings mimic or resist the elements, forms and types of religious buildings â?? altars, pilgrimage routes, temples, churches, mausoleums . Religious ritual and performance are enacted, repeated, copied and even parodied in open and purpose-built spaces. Panpsychism too is embedded in understandings of nature, space and landscape, though less obviously. So a comparison is apt.

As far as I can tell, scholars neither of panpsychism nor consciousness claim overtly to operate within the realms of religion or theology, though there are overlaps between philosophy and theology as there are with mathematics, physics and biology. As a curious follower of Martin Heidegger, I harbour the expectation that the two positions may be reconciled, or at least put in a productive antagonism as â??earth juts through worldâ?• (49).

## 1. Narrative content

I am writing this on Trinity Sunday â?? 12 June this year in the Anglican calendar. I was struck today of all days by the narrative content of the Christian traditions. Having read recently about panpsychism (and *spirit*), a major difference shone through. Whether observed from a position of belief, scepticism or just historical and cultural curiosity, religious doctrine, practice and experience is imbued with stories. These are not just narratives that explain the discovery or justification of some religious truth, but plots, characters, end points and twists that imbue religious practice from top to bottom. In fact, I have been in the company of liberal clerics who leave to one side matters of truthfulness and personal belief and focus on the parables, miracles, stories of original sin, sacrifice and redemption, as key narratives the telling of which resonates with and enhances human experience.

## 2. Personhood

Narratives require characters, actors. Religious practice, at least in the so-called religions of the book (Christianity, Judaism, Islam) personalise what might otherwise be regarded in panpsychism as all-pervasive mind within matter. So a Christian God is personal, can be communicated with and has agency in human affairs, let alone the universe at large. For all its talk of the ubiquity of soul, mind, consciousness, the idea of panpsychism does not communicate attributes we normally regard as soulful, thoughtful or attentional.

## 3. Ritual and performance

Performances informed by panpsychism exist. I think of processions, depictions of pantheistic rituals in plays and films, as well as contemporary neo-pagan events such as Burning Man in Nevada and the Beltane Fire Festival in Edinburgh. The latter personifies Spring as she leaves behind the demons of Winter. Such spectacles are no doubt countered by performances of quiet reflection and meditation on nature and the panpsychic universe. Contrariwise, in so far as religious rituals represent an orthodoxy that is repeated they amplify *liturgy*. Again, liberal religious clerics I know will emphasise the processes by which people come together in worship and communion. They may even translate belief â?? the opening words of the Apostlesâ?? Creed â??I believeâ?• â?? to â??we believe.â?• Community and fellowship are ubiquitous in human affairs. Ritual helps bind them.

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## 4. Morality and justice

According to Richard Holloway, a former bishop of Edinburgh, you donâ??t need a concept of a personal God to know what makes for a moral life. Nor do you need God or his/her possible reward or retribution as a motivation to do good. Hence Hollowayâ??s book: *Godless Morality: Keeping Religion out of Ethics*. I would add, nor do you need panpsychism in order to treat life as sacred, preserve nature, and reject exploitation of the environment. That said, the content of religious narrative is overtly moral, with stories of justice and ethical thought, motivation, behaviour and consequences. We can infer ethical corollaries to panpsychism, but they are not woven into a panpsychistic system of thought and action.

I am perhaps disclosing a bias towards religious practice here, a set of traditions the release from which many find liberating. Back to architecture: many may might find a turn to a panpsychist orientation toward environment more liberating than one constrained by religious orthodoxy. Religious narratives of domination and, at best, *stewardship* have not served well a respect for environment, a situation that a panpsychist orientation might redress.

## References

- Heidegger, Martin. â??The origin of the work of art.â?• In *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 15-87. New York: Harper and Rowe, 1971.
- Holloway, Richard. *Godless Morality: Keeping Religion out of Ethics*. Edinburgh: Canongate, 1999.

**Category**

1. Nature

**Tags**

1. panpsychism
2. religion

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